DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 979 CS 213 122

TITLE Covering the Literacy Story: A Primer for Journalists on a Major Social Issue. Results of the Reporters' Workshop on Literacy (Arlington, Virginia, July 22, 1990). A Gannet Foundation "Instant Replay" Conference Report.

INSTITUTION Gannett Foundation, Arlington, VA.

PUB DATE 22 Jul 90

NOTE 13p.; Workshop presented during the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation Conference in Literacy (Washington, DC, July 22, 1990). The workshop was also co-sponsored by the American Society of Newspaper Editors Literacy Committee and the Education Writers Association.

PUB TYPE Collected Works - Conference Proceedings (021)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.

DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; *Illiteracy; Information Sources; Literacy; *Mass Media Role; Newspapers; *News Reporting; Social Problems; *Writing for Publication

IDENTIFIERS Journalists

ABSTRACT

This report condenses discussions held at the 1990 Reporters' Workshop on Literacy, attended by about 40 journalists and other professionals. The workshop's purpose was to help journalists dig beneath the traditional "Johnny can't read" stories to report on the serious social implications of illiteracy in America. Following an introduction, the report is presented in nine brief sections in telegraphic style. The sections are: (1) Why cover literacy? (2) Who will read literacy stories? (3) How not to cover literacy; (4) Effective approaches; (5) Fast facts about literacy; (6) List of resources; (7) Quotes; (8) List of workshop participants; and (9) Brief description of the Gannett Foundation. (SR)

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A Gannett Foundation "Instant Replay"
Conference Report

Covering the Literacy Story:

A primer for journalists on a major social issue

Results of the Reporters' Workshop on Literacy,
co-sponsored by
the American Society of Newspaper Editors Literacy Committee,
the Education Writers Association, and the Gannett Foundation,
at Gannett Foundation headquarters
July 22, 1990

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INTRODUCTION

This report condenses discussions at the Reporters' Workshop on Literacy July 22, 1990, at the Gannett Foundation. The workshop was sponsored jointly by the American Society of Newspaper Editors Literacy Committee, the Education Writers Association, and the Gannett Foundation.

The workshop, attended by about 40 journalists and other professionals, took place during the American Newspaper Publishers Association Foundation's 1990 Literacy Conference in Washington, D.C.

"For years, many newspapers have treated the battle against illiteracy as a civic responsibility rather than a major untold story," said Karen Jurgensen, a workshop organizer and a senior editor at USA TODAY. "The workshop was an effort to help journalists dig beneath the traditional 'Johnny can't read' stories and report on the serious social implications of illiteracy in America."

Charles L. Overby, Gannett Foundation president and CEO, said, "In supporting First Amendment freedoms, the Gannett Foundation has long recognized that people who can't read can't exercise those freedoms. Helping journalists understand and report literacy issues is crucial in the battle for a literate America."

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WHY COVER LITERACY?

Government has noticed the issue. President Bush, Congress, and state governors have declared literacy a major issue.

The Senate passed a literacy bill in February (sponsor: Sen. Paul Simon, D-Ill.). The Simon bill:

-- would raise Adult Education Act authorization to $300 million, including $30 million for a workplace literacy program, and raise funding to $60 million for Even Start, a program for preschoolers and parents.

-- would create a Cabinet-level council to coordinate federal literacy efforts, fund a family literacy program, create state literacy resource centers, and set up a national literacy center.

The House passed a more comprehensive literacy bill in July (sponsor: Rep. Tom Sawyer, D-Ohio). The Sawyer bill:

-- would create a National Institute for Literacy and authorize state literacy resource centers, for better coordination of literacy programs, more research, more technical assistance.

-- would increase Adult Basic Education Act funding to $252 million the first year, including teacher training and an expanded Even Start.

The two bills go to conference this summer.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Education Department is undertaking to define and measure adult literacy levels.

20-30 million people nationwide are affected. That is, about that many people have problems to a greater or lesser degree with the basic skills of reading and writing.

American economic well-being depends on literacy. The U.S. economy is trying to compete in an increasingly information-oriented world economy. The American work force is geared mainly to a one-man, one-bolt assembly-line approach. To be competitive, workers need the skills to understand, adapt to and work creatively with new technologies. Experts are warning that unless American labor-force skills improve, a lower standard of living is in store for all Americans.

Our children's future depends on it. They are going to be looking for jobs that will require a mastery of basic reading and math skills at the very least. Ideally, they will also need the thinking skills to impose order on a chaos of information; the ability to communicate with precision; the ability to continue to learn and adapt to change; and an ability to work well with people from diverse backgrounds.

So does welfare reform. All states must have welfare-reform programs in place by Oct. 1, 1990. Family Support Act reforms require that most welfare recipients be offered a job or basic-skills training. There has been a lack of media coverage of the need for educational programs to help welfare recipients get off welfare.

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(Why cover literacy, continued)

You're covering education, aren't you? Newspapers can hardly pretend to be covering education if they're not covering literacy. Much of the current change in education is in adult education and occupational training.

It's coverable. There are hot national stories. They also translate into local stories.

WHO WILL READ LITERACY STORIES?

– State and local government officials, policy makers.

– Parents.

– Educators.

– Friends, co-workers and relatives of people with poor basic skills.

– People interested in welfare reform.

– Employers and others interested in issues of economic competitiveness.

– Health and social-service agency officials and staff whose non-reading clients are affected.

– Active, prospective, and former literacy volunteers.

HOW NOT TO COVER LITERACY

With trite, anecdotal stories. Typically the literacy story is treated as a cute, heart-warming feature about someone who never learned to read, hid it all his or her life, finally decided to "come out of the closet" and get tutoring help, and now lives happily ever after reading stories to grandchildren.

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EFFECTIVE APPROACHES

Start with the wires. Urge the wire services to feed you literacy-related stories. Then run them and use them to start asking questions locally.

Learn more about literacy. (See page 7 for resources.)

Assign a reporter to cover it. Literacy could be incorporated into an education or social services beat. Occasional general-assignment coverage won't develop the story.

Do a local survey. Starting this year, find out annually what's going on locally. Ask:

-- How many adult non-readers are there in your area?

-- What's being done? Who provides which kinds of services? (Adult basic education, vocational education, Job Training Partnership Act, welfare, social-service, business, labor, churches, volunteer and other community groups)

-- How many people are being served in literacy programs? Does that meet the need?

-- How are those programs funded and what are their budgets? Do they have enough money? Books and other resources? Do they operate in the summer, when most adults are available? Are they restricted by federal, state, or local mandates?

-- Are the programs doing any good? What are the results? What's the dropout rate?

-- Do local welfare, social-services and other agencies coordinate with literacy programs? If not, why not?

Ask your representatives to Congress. Find out how your area representatives feel about literacy issues.

State and local officials. Do they know anything about literacy? Is it on their agenda? If not, why not? Has anything about literacy been mandated by the state legislature?

Schools. Are school boards dealing with literacy issues? What tests are being used to gauge literacy levels? What's happening in the elementary and secondary schools? Are local colleges and universities involved? Do local schools share their computers with literacy programs during off-hours?

Talk to literacy teachers. They'll probably have both horror stories and success stories.

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(Effective approaches, continued)

Talk to adult learners. Are they learning or did they learn? Have their lives changed? Follow an adult learner through a program. Push for the real results behind the test scores.

Check the prisons. Any literacy programs there? A high percentage of prison inmates have poor basic skills.

Follow the turf war. The U.S. Department of Education disagrees with much that's in the House education bill that pertains to literacy. The department says:

-- that the House bill duplicates work that the Department of Education already does.

-- that although it supports the National Center for Adult Literacy called for in the bill, the department should control the center (as in the Senate version).

-- that the interagency mandate called for in the bill already exists in the form of an interagency task force.

Follow the English-as-a-second-language debate. Some literacy specialists say that the best way for someone to learn English as a second language is by being taught in his or her native language.

Others say the "Berlitz" total-immersion approach is a faster and more effective way to help non-English-speaking adults become functional in American society.

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FAST FACTS ABOUT LITERACY

Number of illiterate adults: 20-30 million nationwide.

Number of adult non-readers being taught: 3 million nationwide.

Number of volunteer literacy tutors: 200,000 nationwide.

Number of trained, professional adult literacy teachers: 6,000 nationwide.

Average amount of basic-skills improvement an adult achieves in a literacy program: 1.5 grade levels per year.

Most time the average adult learner stays in a literacy program: 1 year.

Number of hours of instruction it takes to move an adult up one grade level in a good literacy program: 100. In a bad one: 1,000.

Dropout rate in adult literacy programs after the first couple of weeks: 30-60%.

Percentage of adults completing a literacy program who credit it with helping them find work: 12%.

Increase in number of adults in English-as-a-second-language programs since 1980: 129%.

Decrease in federal funding for adult literacy, in constant dollars, since 1980: 21%.

Combined budgets of the 10 current federal adult literacy programs: $127 million.

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RESOURCES

Book:

Leadership for Literacy, edited by Forrest Chisman. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., Publishers, 1990.

Organizations and offices:

-- Education Writers Association, 1001 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Suite 310, Washington, D.C. 20036; (202) 429-9680. Its Media Resource Project for Literacy is a clearinghouse of literacy information for the media.

-- Southport Institute for Policy Analysis, 440 First St., N.W., Suite 415, Washington, D.C. 20001; (202) 783-7058. Its report, Jump Start, laid the basis for new federal legislation on adult literacy.

-- National Center on Education and the Economy, 39 State St., Suite 500, Rochester, N.Y. 14614; (716) 546-7620. Commissioned the report, America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages, by the Commission on the Skills of the American Workforce, on the connection between low skills and a falling national standard of living.

-- U.S. Education Department, Division of Adult Education and Literacy, 400 Maryland Ave., S.W., Mary E. Switzer Building, Room 4428, Washington, D.C. 20202; (202) 732-2396. Runs a clearinghouse on adult literacy and adult education. Has lists of local literacy programs that reporters can visit.

-- National Governors' Association, 444 N. Capitol St., Hall of States, Suite 250, Washington, D.C. 20001; (202) 624-5300. Runs an exchange on state policies and practices on literacy and adult basic education.

-- Business Council for Effective Literacy, 1221 Avenue of the Americas, 35th floor, New York, N.Y. 10020; (212) 512-2412. Newsletter tracks business involvement in adult literacy.

-- Rep. Tom Sawyer: U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515 (202) 225-5231. Sponsored House literacy bill.

-- Sen. Paul Simon: U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C. 20510; (202) 224-2152. Sponsored Senate literacy bill.

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QUOTES

"Unless local volunteer literacy programs are effective, federal legislation and action are for naught." -- Forrest Chisman

"(The Literacy For All Americans Act) is the most important single development that has ever happened in the literacy field. It has received virtually no coverage. It's not too late to cover it." -- Forrest Chisman

"There is a connection between the strength and health of our economy and education ... We're all stakeholders in our educational system, one way or another." -- Betsy Brand

"One of the inherent ironies of covering literacy is that the people you're writing about can't read your stories." -- Mary Loftus

"Literacy is much more an effect than it is a cause. As reporters we need to spend more time searching out the environment in which illiteracy occurs." -- David Montgomery

"Write it as passionately as you can, based on what actually exists." -- Vivian Gadsden

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Attendees (continued)

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Elizabeth Mullener
New Orleans Times-Picayune

Jim Myers
Tulsa World

Stephanie Oliver
The (Portland) Oregonian

Sharon Richardson
National Association
of Black Journalists

Brendan Schurr
The (Atlantic City, N.J.) Press

Lee Stinnett
American Society
of Newspaper Editors

Betty Sullivan
American Newspaper
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Julia Wallace
USA TODAY

Judy Willis
USA TODAY

Laura Yee
Cleveland Plain Dealer

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USA TODAY

Rene Kimball
Albuquerque Journal

Mary Loftus
The (Lakeland, Fla.) Ledger

Sean Loughlin
New York Times Regional

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GANNETT FOUNDATION

The Gannett Foundation, of Arlington, Va., is among the nation's leading nongovernment funders of adult literacy programs. Since beginning its adult literacy funding in 1985, it has provided more than $6 million to a number of programs and initiatives. These include:

-- $2.66 million for the Literacy Challenge, a three-year, competitive program in cooperation with USA TODAY, to stimulate state-level coalition-building. Twenty states and Puerto Rico won grants to strengthen statewide coordination and cooperation among literacy programs.

-- $2.3 million to local adult literacy organizations in communities served by Gannett Co., Inc. media.

-- more than $1 million in support for a number of national organizations and programs, including: a national Adult Literacy and Technology network; the Literacy Network (formerly the Urban Literacy Development Fund); Literacy Volunteers of America; Laubach Literacy Action; the Assault on Illiteracy Program; the American Bar Association's forum on the Immigration Reform and Control Act; the Business Council for Effective Literacy.

The Gannett Foundation, with year-end 1989 assets of $650 million, is among the nation's largest private foundations. It spent about $30 million on grants, programs and operations in 1989.

The foundation also funds national programs to improve the teaching and practice of journalism, community projects, programs encouraging philanthropy and volunteerism, and scholarships.

Its two operating programs are the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University, the nation's first institute for the advanced study of mass communication and technological change, and the Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowships in Washington, D.C. The foundation was created in 1935 by Frank Gannett, founder of Gannett Co., Inc.

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